

WOODLAND AND VILLAGE: REFLECTIONS ON THE 'ANIMAL ESTATE' IN RURAL MALAWI

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Scholars have recently suggested a contrast between the attitude of hunter-gatherers towards the animal world – one of sacramental equality – and that of agricultural peoples, who express an attitude of opposition and control. Reflecting on the symbolic and complementary opposition between the woodland and the village that is pervasive in Malawian culture, I attempt in this article to outline an approach to the woodland domain, and to the mammals associated with it, that seems to combine both these perspectives. I suggest that the Malawian approach to the woodland and its animal life is essentially an ambivalent one. On the one hand, the horticultural focus of the village community underwrites a view of wild animals as fundamentally antagonistic to human well-being. On the other hand, the woodland and the mammals identified with it are seen as a source of materials and of life-generating powers. This 'unity-in-opposition', and the complementary dualism associated with it, express an essentially cyclical conception of life and its continual renewal, a process of ongoing social generation.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to discuss social attitudes towards the woodland domain among people of rural Malawi. I shall specifically focus on their attitudes towards wild mammals, for both practically and symbolically, mammals are fundamentally identified with this domain.

Malawian¹ attitudes towards mammals – and more generally towards the natural world – are diverse, complex and multi-dimensional. Thus an 'ethic of antagonism' towards wild animals, which as we shall see below has been suggested by some writers as characteristic of agricultural peoples, co-exists with other very different social attitudes and perspectives. These include the empirical (in terms of knowledge structures), pragmatic (with respect to the uses of mammals as food and medicine), aesthetic (incorporating the 'friendship' expressed towards the domestic cat and dog and the role that animals play in moral education through folk tales and proverbs), and empathetic (expressed in certain contexts where a fundamental affinity and close inter-relationship is seen to exist between living humans, animals and the spirits of the dead – an attitude that is basically similar to that found among hunter-gatherers). But my focus in this article is on the dialectical opposition between humans and mammals that is pervasive in the culture and social practices of rural Malawians. This opposition reflects an ambivalent attitude towards the woodland, and specifically towards mammals. On the one hand, in terms of the village

community and agriculture, wildlife from the woodlands is seen as fundamentally hostile and antagonistic to human endeavours; while on the other hand, the woodland domain is seen as the external source of life-generating powers. Mammals are seen as prototypical of the woodland in this respect. They are regarded as the embodiment of 'power' and fierceness, and are seen as essentially opposed to humans (as wild beasts [*chirombo*]); but they are also seen as the source of meat (*nyama*), of activating medicines (*chizimba*) and, in being closely identified with the spirits of the dead and affinal males, as the essential source of fertility, and thus the continuity of the kin group (and village). Wild mammals, then, form a crucial part in the ongoing cyclic processes of life and of social reproduction. These processes are expressed in a complementary or dialectical opposition between two facets of Malawian social existence, namely between the woodland and the village, between hunting and agriculture, between the in-marrying male affine and the kin-group focused around a core of matrilineally-related women, and between spirits and wild animals (the two of which are closely identified with one another) and living humans.²

To facilitate the later discussion, this complementary dualism may be outlined in the following schema, though this should not be interpreted as some totalizing cosmology that systematizes all aspects of Malawian culture:

Woodland	Village
(<i>Thengo</i>)	(<i>Mudzi</i>)
Hunting	Agriculture
Dry season	Wet Season
Affinal males	Matrilineal kingroup
(semen)	(blood)
Spirits of the dead	Living humans
(<i>mizimu ya makolo</i>)	(<i>anthu</i>)
Wild animals	Domestic animals
(<i>chirombo</i>)	(<i>chiweto</i>)

My discussion is divided into four sections. In the first section I discuss two contrasting attitudes towards nature, and specifically towards wild mammals: the egalitarian, sacramental attitude, and the oppositional and controlling one. Some scholars have identified these with hunting-gathering and agricultural modes of subsistence. My suggestion is that historically, Malawian culture has always, in a sense, combined these two contrasting attitudes, for both hunting and hoe agriculture have been important and complementary facets of Malawian socio-economic life.

In the second section I discuss the familiar dichotomy between culture and nature. After briefly looking at some of the cross-cultural material, I outline one of the fundamental distinctions in Malawian culture between the village (*mudzi*) and the woodland (*thengo*). I suggest that this dichotomy is not simply homologous with the gender division, although symbolically it is the affinal male who is identified with the wild animals that frequent the woodland and female consanguines who are identified with the village. Although I stress the dichotomy between the woodland and the village environs in this section, in the section that follows I explore the association of the woodland with the

spirits of the dead, and suggest that the two domains are intrinsically connected so as to constitute a cyclic process that is fundamentally concerned with life and its renewal.

In the final section I examine the concepts of *chirombo* ('wild beast') and *nyama* ('game animal' or 'meat') and suggest that these concepts indicate the ambivalence or the 'dialectical opposition' that Malawians express towards the wild mammals of the woodland.

Contrasting attitudes to animals: foragers and horticulturalists

The past decade has seen a growing interest in social attitudes towards animal life, both from an anthropological and a social-historical perspective (Serpell 1986; Ritvo 1987; Ingold 1988; Willis 1990). This interest, however, has reflected a tendency, especially when scholars make global contrasts across cultures, to take a rather monolithic view of specific cultures. Thus pre-literate communities are seen as having only a 'sacramental' vision of nature, in stark contrast to that of Western culture, which is rather misleadingly equated with the mechanistic philosophy of the Enlightenment with its rigid dualism – including the rigid dualism between humans and animals – and its ethic of domination, thus completely ignoring the diversity and the changing nature of the Western cultural tradition. Indeed many scholars (eg Merchant 1992: 59) write as if historically there are only two possible 'world views', the mechanistic (anthropocentric) and the organismic (ecocentric). The latter is a conceptual 'rag-bag' for a diverse collection of ontologies, old and new. Not only does this ignore the fundamental fact that many religious systems are theocentric rather than ecocentric, but also it assumes that in Europe little has changed since the seventeenth century. This ignores the fundamental re-orientation of thought initiated in the nineteenth century by Hegel and Darwin, by the rise of the biological sciences, and by the development of historical understanding, anthropology and the social sciences more generally – quite apart from the theoretical developments within physics itself. The writings of Jonas (1966) and Mayr (1982; 1988) present a much more balanced view of the history of Western thought than do many contemporary writers on ecology.

What is of particular interest in recent writings on the 'animal estate' is a growing recognition that cultural attitudes towards animals among hunter-gatherers and among agricultural societies contrast markedly. Having undertaken anthropological research in both kinds of social context, this contrast has been confirmed by my own studies.

The Hill Pandaram of south India are a foraging community, though they have long-established trading contacts with wider Indian society. They are entirely nomadic, living in small forest camps of never more than twenty people, and apart from the dog, have no domestic animals. But, importantly, the Hill Pandaram do not make a stark contrast between themselves and the environment in which they live, being intrinsically a forest people. They are largely hunters of small game – bats, flying squirrels and tortoises – and as I described in my study of their socio-economic life (Morris 1982: 79), they do not hunt, but rather gather animals from the forest, in the same way as they collect nuts and yams. An egalitarian ethos pervades their culture, and they do not make a

stark contrast between themselves and the animal world. Like other hunter-gatherers, they often keep pets, and I have recorded how one young woman breast-fed and cared very affectionately for a young chevrotain deer, only to put it in the pot later (Morris 1978: 15; cf. Serpell 1986: 156; Katcher & Beck 1991: 265-7). For like other hunter-gatherers, the Hill Pandaram attitude towards animals is both empathetic and pragmatic (cf. Guenther 1988).

This sharing and generally egalitarian attitude towards animals expressed by the Hill Pandaram is consonant with that described elsewhere among hunter-gatherers. Animals are seen essentially as social and spiritual equals, with thoughts and feelings analogous to those of humans. Pet keeping, as Serpell describes (1986: 142), is popular among them, and the hunting of animals is hedged with ritual, and the focus of ambivalent feelings. As James Frazer long ago discussed (1922: 679-98), an attitude of respect towards animal life was characteristic of many tribal people, and a hunter could expose himself to vengeance 'magic' on the part of the animal's spirit, if he did not show proper ritual respect towards the slain animals. (For interesting discussions of hunter-gatherer attitudes towards animals, see Tanner [1979], Morris [1981: 130-1], Nelson [1983], Campbell [1984: 81-122], Serpell [1986: 142-9], and Ingold [1986: 243-73].)

Such beliefs, implying an essential 'kinship' between humans and animals, and an emotional involvement between the hunter and the animal, such that, as Serpell writes (1986: 144), the act of killing has the flavour of homicide, are not confined to hunter-gatherers. They have a resonance throughout the world, and are widespread in Africa, where beliefs relating to the 'vengeance' power of the blood of a slain mammal, if the killing is not done with appropriate ritual respect, have been widely documented (Baumann 1950). Nevertheless, it has to be recognized that the advent of farming has had a profound effect on the way humans relate to the natural world, and specifically towards animal life. Goodman (1992: 19) speaks of the change in culture ushered in by the advent of horticulture as being profound, and the working of the soil as representing a 'fundamental break' with hunter-gatherer attitudes, though she has little to say on people's attitudes towards animal life *per se*. In his lucid study of human-animal relationships Serpell (1986: 174-6) is, likewise, equally explicit in contrasting hunter-gatherer attitudes towards animals – predominantly ones of respect and egalitarianism – with those of farming communities. The neolithic revolution is seen as a 'journey of no return' and as a 'fall from grace', for farmers have no choice but to set themselves up 'in opposition to nature': in keeping the fields clear of weeds, in protecting themselves and their crops from wild animals, and in controlling and confining domestic livestock. The entire system, Serpell writes, 'depends on the subjugation of nature' and on the 'domination and manipulation of living creatures' (1986: 175; cf. also Kent 1989). The 'ethic of domination' towards animal life, thus, does not begin, it seems, with the rise of mechanistic philosophy in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, but much earlier, with the advent of agriculture.

What is of interest about the Malawian context is that these two attitudes towards the natural world and specifically towards mammals, one – the

sacramental egalitarian – associated with hunter-gatherers, the other – implying an ethic of opposition and control – associated with agriculturalists, do in fact co-exist. They form together a pervasive attitude towards mammals in Malawi which may be described as one of dialectical opposition. This ‘unity-in-opposition’ does, however, have gender implications, for men, as affines, are identified with wild mammals and with the woodland, while women are closely identified with the village environs and thus in opposition to wildlife.

The village/woodland dichotomy

As in many other societies people in Malawi make a fundamental distinction, which has both ecological and symbolic import, between the village (*mudzi*), the domain of living humans, and the Brachystegia woodland (*thengo*), the domain of wild animals (*nyama*) and of the spirits of the dead.

This kind of conceptual distinction has been widely discussed in the literature, largely under the rubric of the opposition between ‘culture’ and ‘nature’. Although this opposition has a deep resonance within European thought and science, given the dominance of the kind of dualistic metaphysic that stems from Cartesian philosophy, it has been subject to a plethora of meanings and interpretations. Long ago Lovejoy (1948) discussed the diversity of meanings of the concept of ‘nature’ even within the European literary tradition. He described the term as a ‘verbal jack-of-all-trades’, nature being at once the most sacred and the most protean of the concepts used during the Enlightenment period. The Greek distinction between *nomos* (custom) and *physis* (nature) can, however, in no sense be equated with the kind of dualisms that were bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment tradition – culture/nature, society/individual, mind/body – although there are fundamental affinities between Plato and Descartes. For many Greeks, Aristotle in particular, *physis* (nature) was in an important sense animate, with latent potentialities.

Recent scholars who have discussed the nature/culture dichotomy have emphasized its problematic nature if applied uncritically as a cross-cultural conception (MacCormack & Strathern 1980; Croll & Parkin 1992). The dichotomy, along with its homology with gender categories, is reflected in much European thought (Ortner 1974; Merchant 1980), but the tendency to see this dichotomy as involving a Promethean ethic – the metaphor of ‘man against nature’, or of human (culture’s) dominion over nature – has not been found to jell at all neatly with the cultural categories of pre-literate communities. Among the people of the New Guinea Highlands for example, as Marilyn Strathern (1980) has shown, although the distinction between the ‘domestic’ and the wild has a crucial significance, it is neither homologous with the gender division, nor can it be equated with the culture/nature division of Western thought. But what crucially emerges from much of the ethnographic literature on small-scale farming communities is that a pervasive symbolic dualism is evident which contrasts settlement or the domestic realm with that of the wild, even though its underlying cultural logic may be distinctive. It may indeed, as in New Guinea, not be seen as a rigid ‘dualism’ – in the Neoplatonic or Cartesian sense – and may evoke quite different symbolic associations, the ‘wild’ or forest

being associated with men and the spirits rather than with women (as it is in much Western thought) (Gillison 1980).

In the African context the symbolic demarcation between domesticated space and the 'bush' or forest has been widely reported. In her classic and perceptive ethnographic writings on the Lele, Douglas (1954; 1975: 9-46) writes of the importance of what she calls 'religious categories' among the Lele, and how these symbolically, even if implicitly, structure their thought. One fundamental distinction is that between the village and the forest, mediated by the grassland which is associated with women and the cultivation of groundnuts. By contrast the forest is seen as the abode of the spirits and animals, and as the source of many of the necessities of life – maize, fish, meat, water, firewood, fertility. Likewise Jean Comaroff (1985: 54) writes of the distinction between the social or domesticated domain and the 'wild' or bush as the 'most fundamental' of all oppositions in the Tswana cosmos, even though the opposition is seen as being mediated by women and production. Recent ethnographic studies of the Dogon, Mende and Aouan of West Africa confirm this widespread articulation of an 'opposition' between the 'bush' and the 'village'. For the Dogon of Mali the 'bush' is associated with the spirits and animals, and with danger, yet at the same time it is considered the origin, the 'ultimate source' of everything that makes life possible – knowledge, wisdom, power, fertility, as well as life itself. The bush/village dichotomy thus implies an entropic system (Van Beek & Banga 1992: 67-73). For the Aouan of the Ivory Coast, the forest forms an all-encompassing environment surrounding the village, and contains the spirit beings that bestow life and which rule over animals and plants. It is on the forest that the people depend for physical subsistence, and various taboos and rules exist to maintain the boundary between the two domains (Van der Bremer 1992: 99).

There is, in Malawi, no widely used general category that could be considered equivalent to the English concept of 'environment', nor even to the more abstract category of 'space', although Malawians, like other Bantu speakers, have a highly developed spatial sense which is built into their language. The 'gaps' between things such as garden plants are referred to as *danga*, while the space between rocks and hills are denoted by the term *mpata*. A valley between hills, a mountain pass or a gorge, is thus referred to by the latter term, and the famous gorge on the River Shire is named *mpatamanga* (*manga*, 'to make', 'bind').

The crucial spatial distinction for people in Malawi, however, is that between the *Brachystegia* woodland (together with the hill forests) and the villages and their cultivated environs. *Mudzi* means village, and the term has both an ecological and a social connotation, referring in rural areas to a cluster of huts – which may or may not form a discrete geographical unit occupied by the core members of a matrilineal group. When Mitchell spoke of the village as a 'key concept in Yao thought' and as the 'fundamental unit' in their social structure (1956: 2-3), he was not exaggerating, and it is of interest that he entitled his study of the political and social structure of the Yao *The Yao village*. The village head is a key figure in the day-to-day activities of the village and in the organization of rituals, even though his or her political standing in the wider

community may be limited. When people refer to their own village or kin group, they commonly use the expression *kwathu*, 'ours', which essentially means 'home' in both a geographical and a social sense, and the term carries connotations of intimacy. Within the village structure there are distinct households focused around a woman and her in-marrying spouse. The village environs include also the cultivated area (*munda*) which produces mainly maize, millet and cassava, together with pumpkins and beans which are planted inter-spaced. In the past, people in Malawi were largely shifting hoe-cultivators, although permanent gardens along the lake shore or in wetlands or valley areas were important.

Beyond the village cultivations are the *Brachystegia* or *miombo* woodlands which, although they tend to look rather monotonous and uniform to an outsider, are in fact floristically rather complex, their nature and composition depending not only on specific local factors such as altitude, rainfall, drainage and soil type, but also on their past history. Many have stressed that such woodland is a plagio-climax – a plant community which has been formed and is maintained by continuous human agency (Morris 1970: 155). The Malawian attitude to such woodland is essentially positive, and contrasts markedly with that of Europeans. Even wildlife biologists who have spent long periods in Africa 'have little love for *miombo*'. The woodlands are described as a 'flat, monotonous stretch of trees' and as 'unchanging', and to travel through them one has to endure 'numbing boredom' (Adams & McShane 1992: 123–4). Surprisingly, the woodland environment is hardly mentioned in Mandala's (1990) important account of the peasant economy of the Mang'anja of the Lower Shire. This environment, however, is a crucial source of essential subsistence goods – timber, string and thatching grass for building houses and granaries, mushrooms, fruits and wild vegetables, all kinds of medicine and, of course, wild animals, which provide an important source of relish. The woodland is also the primary source of energy in the form of firewood, which is often gathered by women far from the village.

Malawians refer to the woodland as *thengo* or *tchire*, and although the words are often used interchangeably, discussions with Malawians suggest that *tchire*, in contrast to *thengo*, is often more associated with regenerate *Brachystegia* woodland, where ample thatching grass and fieldmice are to be found. In Malawi the firing of the woodland at the end of the dry season has both a pragmatic and a symbolic significance; in the past the right to initiate the burning of the woodland was vested in one of the senior chiefs (*mwini mzinda*), and it was a serious offence for anyone to burn the bush before the allotted time (Rangeley 1948: 51). Formerly this was done late in the season and, as Schoffeleers (1971) has discussed, the burning of the bush had an important significance in the regeneration of the cosmic cycle and the subsequent coming of the rains. Burnt woodland is referred to as *lupsya*; the verb *ku-psy* meaning not only to cook, roast or burn, but also to be ripe.

The village environs are associated with what Fortes (1969) called the 'axiom of amity', with order, moral rectitude, structure and social well-being. But it would be misleading to equate the mudzi/thengo division with either a culture/nature dichotomy or a gender division. Although men as hunters are

often associated with the woodland, woodland is not specifically the domain of men (*amuna*), but rather the domain of men as affines. Women too are associated with the woodland as gatherers of firewood and wild foods, while men are also identified with the village domain. Men clear the woodland of trees so that cultivation may be established, they bring in woody material to construct the houses, they gather medicines from the woodland, as well as meat, and most importantly it is from the woodland and from men (as affines/spirits) that fertilizing power is derived for the procreation of children. Semen is called *ubwamuna* – the essence, as it were, of males as affines – and blood is referred to as *mwazi* or *magazi*, which is semantically close to the word for the female gender, *mkazi*. In essence, the procreation of a child consists concretely of the mixing of the semen of a man with the blood of the woman. Analogously, the most satisfying meal consists of a relish (*ndiwo*, meat from the woodland)³ taken with maize porridge (*nsima*, derived from women's activities in the village), and the most powerful medicines consist of plant substances (*mitengo*, roots, leaves, bark of woody plants) activated by *chizimba* medicines, primarily the skins, tails and horns of animals from the woodland.⁴ It would be easy to construct a homologous series of complementary symbolic oppositions:

Thengo	Mudzi
woodland	village
hunting	cultivation
animals	plants
men	women

However, such a structural analysis tends to over-systematize the cultural reality (cf. Schoffeleers 1968: 231). The complementary opposition between the woodland and the human habitus reflects less the gender division than the opposition between affines and kin, for symbolically it is as affines that men are associated with the woodland and with the animals. Although spirits of the dead/ancestors are also associated with the woodland, it would again be misleading specifically to identify men with these spirits. What essentially is expressed in Malawian culture with respect to the *thengo/mudzi* division is that whereas in the village environs a fundamental – but complementary – opposition is articulated between men and women, kin and affines, humans and wild animals – in the woodland there is a fundamental identity between these categories. In an important sense the spirits of the dead are collective ancestors – both men and women, kin and affines. In the woodland domain there is an essential identity between men and animals, and also between spirits and animals – and this is reflected in rituals. In the village, however, there is an opposition between humans and animals – and this too is reflected in rituals.⁵

The woodland and spirits of the dead

The Brachystegia woodland, in contrast to the village domain, is associated with medicines, wild animals and the spirits of the dead. Given a tradition of slash-and-burn agriculture and the essential nature of Brachystegia woodland itself, with its inherent ability to regenerate vegetatively, many areas of woodland represent old village sites. The site of a former village, or an uninhabited

area of woodland, is referred to as *dzinja*, a term which also refers to the rainy season between December and March. Throughout Malawi, even in the heavily populated area of the Shire Highlands, areas of woodland are set aside as burial sites for the dead.⁶ They are known as *manda* and the ancestors, or the dead, are collectively referred to as *amanda* (those of the woodland grave). In the Domasi district where I lived, almost every village had its own area of woodland where the dead were buried. These burial sites are in the nature of a sacred grove; no trapping or hunting of animals is allowed in them and the area is protected from fire, for the site has to be kept 'cool'. It is also an offence against the spirits of the dead to collect firewood, medicines and thatching grass from the *manda*. In times of acute pressure on resources due to population increase, people may in fact gather firewood or grass from the *manda* woodlands, but this is not approved of. When I was in Ntcheu in the central region many Chewa people I spoke to were very critical of the recent refugees from Mozambique who had gathered firewood from the nearby hill forests, forests which were particularly associated with the rain deities. Apart from attending funerals and making ritual offerings to their dead, people do not normally enter the *manda* woodlands. It is in these woodlands that the initiation site of the Nyau dancers⁷ is to be found. The *manda* woodlands thus essentially form a conservation area, and a refuge for wildlife. Even monkeys, when raiding the village gardens, act as though they feel safe in such environs.

The forests/woodlands associated with the graves of important chiefs, or with the rain deities, are of particular importance as ritual sites, and may be entered only with the special permission of the ritual specialists associated with the spirits. The forest on almost every important hill in Malawi is associated with some particular rain spirit, and many of the lowland forests – because they have been untouched for many generations by either hoe or fire – are important ecological sites. In 1964 I was granted permission to enter the relic forest on the loop of the Litchenya River, Mulanje (which is the graveyard of the ancestors of Chief Mabuka), in order to study the epiphytic orchids still to be found there. The forest is unique in being a remnant patch of the evergreen forest that once clothed the southeastern slopes of Mulanje Mountain, and which was cleared in the early part of the century to make way for the tea plantations (Chapman 1962: 16–17; see also Chapman 1988; Kathamalo 1965; Schoffeleers 1992). Sacred forests associated with spirits of the dead or with territorial rain deities are, however, to be found throughout Malawi.

An important distinction seems to be drawn between the *manda* woodlands associated with the spirits of a particular local community, and the forests to be found on particular hills or mountains, which are associated with various rain deities, or with the original inhabitants of Malawi, the Batwa people. Mountains such as Mchesi, Thyolo, Mulanje and the Nyika seem to be essentially seen as abodes of spirits and many people look upon these mountains with respect, with awe, even with fear. I have elsewhere written on Michesi mountain in southern Malawi, which one Lomwe writer has referred to as *malo otchuka a mizimu* – 'the famous place of spirits' (Soka 1953: 28–9; Morris 1994).

Evidently in the Malawian context the complementary opposition between the woodland and the village is conceived as homologous to that between the

spirits of the dead and living people. This latter opposition must, however, be seen in terms of a cyclic conception of life processes. There are specific ceremonies known as *manyumba* (*nyumba*, house) whereby individuals are seen – or rather witnessed – as undergoing a symbolic rebirth, as the reincarnation of their grandparents. But this process is not a karma-like reincarnation of some immortal ‘spirit’, but rather a cycle of transformation.⁸ It implies a metamorphosis between the living and the dead, a cyclic transmutation. This process may be seen as an exchange of substances, for people make offerings for their dead relatives; on death a person is transmuted into an ancestral spirit. But essentially it is a cyclic process of life and death, or rather a process of life and its continuing renewal, activating agencies coming from the woodland.

Since wild animals are associated with the woodland, they are identified with the spirits, and with affinal males, who are essentially seen as aggressive and sexual. This is why the in-marrying male affine is always conceptualized as a stranger (*mlendo*) and is typified by the cock and the hyena. *Nyau* and *chinyago* rituals among the Chewa, Mang’anja and Yao (see footnote 7) essentially involve the cultural creation of an affinal male, and the theriomorphic figures that are involved in such rites represent the spirits of the dead in animal form. Thus it implies the identity – almost – of spirits, wild animals and affinal males. And such figures dance at the girls’ initiation rites in opposition to the women, as a kin-group. Thus a clear distinction is made in Malawian culture between, on the one hand, the personality of a territorial chief and the affinal male (husband), who are conceptualized as outsiders and as hunters, and on the other hand, the village headman, who as a brother is identified with the collectivity of women who constitute the matrilineal core of the village community. Ideally he should be a male mother.

But in certain contexts, the woodland may also be seen as antagonistic to human endeavours, particularly to their endeavours as agriculturalists. Thus a perceptive observer of Malawian culture, Thomas Price, has written that to an ordinary villager, even trees may be seen as an ‘enemy’. Price writes that when the trees are cleared away to make room for the gardens ‘they sprouted up again, snagging hoes’, and that people when travelling between villages invariably carried a machete, which they automatically used to slash back the growing saplings. He contended that the designation of forest reserves by the government was seen by local people as an intolerable interference with their movement and settlement under shifting cultivation (Price cited in Potter 1987: 145). The point, of course, is that while in terms of medicine, energy, building materials, and a supply of relish in the form of animal meat and mushrooms – and equally importantly of human fertility via the spirits of the dead – the woodland is a crucial and indispensable provider of much that is important to human life, for the agriculturalist the woodland, and particularly the animals that are associated with it, are serious threats to livelihood. Hence their ambivalence towards this domain, and towards animals in particular.

Wild mammals (chirombo) of the woodland

It is, I think, difficult for people living in urban areas to realize how precarious life is for subsistence agriculturalists; and it has to be remembered that historically

the matrilineal peoples of Malawi were fundamentally subsistence hoe cultivators. Not only is such agriculture highly dependent on rain, but the depredations of wild animals were a constant source of concern and anxiety, as they still are. Such depredations take a toll both of agricultural crops – and baboons, monkeys, elephants, porcupines and wild pigs are the main culprits – and of human life itself.⁹

Thus, although in hunting, or in certain ritual contexts, a close identification is expressed between affinal males, wild mammals and spirits of the dead, in other contexts the opposition between wild mammals and humans (the kin community) is emphasized. Thus a dialectical opposition emerges and this is reflected in the two key concepts that are used to describe mammals – *nyama* and *chirombo* – both of which have a taxonomic and functional usage, and indicate a wide range of referents (Morris 1984). Essentially *nyama* is a polysemic term meaning both meat and prototypically any edible species of mammal, although it can also refer to wild animals generally. Domestic animals (*chiweto*) are typically *nyama*, though the goats, sheep and chickens which form the basic livestock are eaten only on important or ritual occasions. But *nyama* also has a ritual significance, because of its association with hunting, and connotes the mystical power associated with the mammal. In Malawi there is a particular affliction, *chirope*, that affects hunters, and which is associated with the vengeance power of the mammal, especially mammals such as the kudu or eland. Hunting is therefore hedged with ritual. Offerings to the spirits must be made prior to the hunt, protective medicines used, and because the woodland is considered a cool environment, a hunter must enter in a 'cool' condition. He must therefore have no feelings of anger or discord, and must abstain from sexual intercourse prior to the hunt, for sex generates heat. The provision of meat incorporates the wild mammal into the kin group as relish food. Significantly, while 'meat' is food and is associated with nurturance and the kin group, the skins, horns and tails of mammals are associated with activating medicines, with the spirits of the dead, and with the affinal male. The latter animal constituents express the ongoing continuity of life processes, as I have explored elsewhere.¹⁰

Chirombo, on the other hand, is a category that refers to all organisms that are either useless or harmful to humans. The prototypical *chirombo* are the hyena, lion and leopard. But the term may refer to all mammals associated with the woodland, as 'wild' animals, particularly if they damage crops. Like *nyama*, the term has important symbolic connotations, for it is the term used to describe the masked dancers and the theriomorphic figures in *nyau* and *chinyago* rituals, the male dancers impersonating the spirits of the dead who take animal forms. The *nyau*, as *chirombo*, come from the woodland, and are aggressive, fierce, vital and sexual – as the male affine is expected to be.

Conclusion

In a number of different ways, focusing specifically on wild mammals, I have explored the dialectic that centres around the symbolic opposition – pervasive in Malawian culture – between the woodland and the village. The woodland domain is associated with wild animals, with the spirits of the dead, and is

fundamentally a cool place.¹¹ This is why such a creative act as hunting is profoundly hazardous, and why in the past both iron-smelting and childbirth (among the Yao particularly) took place in the woodland.¹² The woodland is also associated with hunting, and with the male affine, which is why boys' initiation ceremonies always take place in this setting. The village domain, on the other hand, is associated with agriculture, with sexuality and procreation, and is essentially the domain of a kin community, focused around a group of matrilineally related women, under the guardianship of an elder brother. The initiation of girls always takes place in the village, close to the hut of the headman, and the initiation essentially involves the incorporation of the girl into the collectivity of women.

I have attempted also to indicate that the series of complementary oppositions that I have outlined do not imply a static order, nor a karmic process, but essentially reflect a cyclical process in which life, particularly the social life of the kin community, is sustained and regenerated. In seeing the woodland and its mammalian life both as the source of much that is essential to life – meat, building materials, medicines, wild foods and, most importantly, male fertility – and as the harbinger of much that is detrimental to human well-being, above all in the form of the depredations of wild animals, I have also suggested that this underwrites an attitude towards the world that is ambivalent, one of dialectical opposition. Perhaps this attitude is widespread among horticultural people who are still dependent upon a woodland environment that is frequented by wild mammals.

NOTES

I have spent more than ten years in Malawi and have lived for short periods and researched in every part of the country. The present article, however, is based on two extensive periods of research studies in ethnobiology, 1979-80 and 1990-91, supported by the ESRC and the Nuffield Foundation. I am grateful to these agencies for their support. I should also like to thank the Centre for Social Research, Zomba, for institutional support, and my many friends in Malawi for their help and encouragement. With respect to the present article, I am grateful to Pat Caplan and to the anonymous readers of this journal for helping me to put my rambling thoughts into some kind of order. My indebtedness to the early pioneering studies of Rankeley and Schoffeleers will be self-evident.

¹ My reflections in this article essentially refer to the rural people of central and southern Malawi, for I firmly believe, like Levi Mumba, that the matrilineal peoples of Malawi share a common cultural heritage, although there are, of course, cultural variations between the different ethnic communities. I use Chewa terms in the article for two reasons: 1) this is the language I used in my conversations with Malawians, and 2) Chewa is now regarded as the national language and is spoken and understood throughout Malawi, although one may occasionally encounter an elderly Yao or Lomwe woman who speaks little Chewa. Although I have spent several weeks in the Mua, Dedza, Kasungu, Lilongwe and Ntchisi areas, I have lived most of my time in Malawi among Yao and Lomwe speakers.

² Based on hoe agriculture, and with hunting and trade important aspects of their political economy, the people of Malawi historically formed part of what has been described as the 'matrilineal belt'. Since around the sixteenth century they were also organized through a changing pattern of chiefdoms, thus confirming what both Bachofen (1967: 152) and Harris (1993: 64-9) intimate, namely that a close link exists between matriliney and petty chiefdoms based on hunting, trade and warfare, where men are frequently away from a kin community focused around women and agriculture.

³ It is of interest that men – the in-marrying affines – are essentially seen as the providers of meat from wild animals, providing the highly valued ingredients for the relish which goes with the maize porridge. The historian of the Chewa, Samuel Ntara (1973: 119) mentions an exchange of meat for sex, a theme explored by Knight (1991) in his study of the origins of culture.

⁴ The analogy, of course, refers not to ecological or symbolic domains, but to the distinction between substance and activating agency.

⁵ A colleague has suggested to me that there are contradictions evident in my analysis. But as Berdyaev and others have suggested, contradictions lie at the very heart of existence, and are there in the empirical world that constitutes Malawian culture whose ethos I attempt to portray (Berdyaev, cited in Seaver 1950: 10). As Malawian thought is diverse, shifting and processual, I have been reluctant to press the analysis into a static symbolic schema. This is why I deliberately eschew the structural analysis of Schoffeleers (1968), which implies a totalizing logic.

⁶ When I lived in Malawi in the late 1950s, much of the country was a mosaic of woodland and villages, and the graveyards were often on the edge of the woodland. The graveyards thus had a marginal existence between the woodland and the gardens, a focal point, as it were, of the woodland just as the meeting place/court is the centre of the village community. Over the last thirty years much of the *Brachystegia* woodland has disappeared, leaving the *manda* often as isolated patches: around the major urban centres even these have been cut for firewood.

⁷ *Nyau* is a secret male fraternity among the Chewa and Mang'anja, consisting of those who have undertaken the initiations. It performs dances on certain ritual occasions, especially at funerals of important people, commemorative rites, and as a part of the girls' initiation rites. Members of the cult perform at these rituals as masked dancers or theriomorphic figures. The *chinyago* (*chinambande*) rites among the Yao perform a similar function in relation to the girls' initiation rite.

⁸ This kind of eschatology seems to be widespread among kin-based communities (cf. Parkin 1992: 203-15 on the Munda of central India for whom the conceptual unity of alternative generations is a fundamental doctrine – as in Malawi – and grandparents are 'reincarnated' in their grandchildren). Parkin stresses its distinction from the karmic doctrine of the transmigration of an immortal indwelling soul.

⁹ Although there has been a great reduction in the population of the larger mammals over the past fifty years or so, wild mammals are still fairly plentiful in Malawi. For though Malawi is one of the most densely populated areas of Africa, 33 per cent. of the country is still under 'natural vegetation' and wildlife conservation areas and forest reserves constitute some 20 per cent. of the total land area. Thus leopards and hyenas still roam at night in the Zomba and Blantyre townships, and in rural areas throughout Malawi local people are still engaged during the agricultural season in a constant battle with hippopotamuses, porcupines, monkeys, baboons and wild pigs – not to mention the smaller rodents – in an effort to defend their crops. On the predations of wild animals in the past see Balestra (1962), Carr (1969: 84-99), Dudley (1979), Muldoon (1955), and various papers in the National Archives of Malawi (Zomba, MNA 51/1721A).

¹⁰ In an interesting analysis of Chamba ritual, Fardon (1990: 30-2) suggests that where the matrikin is associated with subsistence, animals, blood, body and sexuality, the patrikin is associated with the spirits, skulls and bones. The spirits of the dead are thus seen as essentially masculine. Although this analysis has resonance with respect to Malawian culture, the spirits of the dead are not seen as specifically masculine – if anything, *makolo* (ancestors) has connotations of grandmothers. Thus a matrilineal emphasis pertains, and it is the skins, horns and tails of animals that have salience in Malawi, and these are specifically associated with spirits of the dead, activating medicines and male affines, as I have explored elsewhere (Morris 1993).

¹¹ The woodland is also associated with the past, not only with the spirits of the ancestors, but also with the original inhabitants of Malawi, the Batwa hunter-gatherers, who are believed still to frequent many mountain forests in Malawi (Morris 1994).

¹² Hunting, like all creative or transformational activities – cooking, pot-making, iron-smelting, childbirth, initiations – must be undertaken by participants in a cool condition, otherwise misfortunes, or even deaths, might result. Hunting, like menstruation, is hazardous because it involves the shedding of blood: but it is viewed positively by Malawians and is not seen, in gnostic fashion, as the antithesis of childbirth.

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Le village et les bois: quelques réflexions sur le domaine animal au Malawi rural

Résumé

Un certain nombre d'auteurs se sont récemment attachés à dresser un contraste entre le comportement des chasseurs-collecteurs envers le monde animal (un comportement imbu d'égalité sacramentelle), et celui des populations agricoles qui semble exprimer l'opposition et le contrôle. Partant d'une réflexion sur l'opposition symbolique et complémentaire entre le village et les bois, opposition caractéristique de la pensée malawi, l'auteur tente, dans cette première analyse des terres boisées et des mammifères qui y sont associés, de combiner les deux perspectives. Il suggère que la vision malawi des espaces boisés et de la vie animale est essentiellement ambivalente. La communauté villageoise, horticole, représente les animaux sauvages comme antagoniques au bien-être des humains. Mais les bois sont aussi, avec les mammifères qu'on y trouve, la source de matériaux indispensables et de pouvoirs générateurs de vie. Cette 'unité dans l'opposition', et le dualisme complémentaire qui en découle, témoignent d'une conception essentiellement cyclique de la vie, dont le renouveau perpétuel se traduit en un processus continu de génération sociale.

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